DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 346 471 CS 213 385

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TITLE Rereading Multicultural Readers: What Definition of Multicultural Are We Buying?
PUB DATE Mar 92
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (43rd, Cincinnati, OH, March 19-21, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College English; Cultural Context; Cultural Pluralism; Educational Philosophy; *Freshman Composition; Higher Education; Multicultural Education; *Multicultural Textbooks; *Textbook Content; Textbook Research; Thematic Approach
IDENTIFIERS Writing Contexts

ABSTRACT

A flood of new multicultural readers and textbooks are hitting the market for writing and literature courses at the college level. Yet there has been no systematic examination of how these readers are being used, the purposes and audiences for which they are written, or the critical reception they have received. Multicultural readers distinguish themselves in several ways: they encompass broad ethnic and cultural sources, and they often include maps which display geographical coverage. Some texts rely heavily on a western anthropological viewpoint. Gender has become an important consideration, insuring that a significant percentage of writing by women is represented. Also, they are structured according to different voices, rather than a more traditional emphasis on thematic concerns. These textbooks influence the teaching of composition profoundly, since most writing instructors depend heavily on their texts. Multicultural textbooks tend to have underlying theories of pedagogy which feature: (1) a celebration of self-reflection; (2) a pedagogy that is relativistic; (3) an emphasis on "active reading techniques"; and (4) a stress on collaborative learning. An emphasis in the readings is on narrative, which is easily accessible and highly personal. Finally, teachers should consider to what extent their efforts to recognize and teach diversity will ultimately result in empowering their students. Cultural diversity, after all, is not the only, or even a primary goal of a writing class. (A chart giving numerical data from a survey of the contents of eight multicultural readers for freshman composition is attached.) (HB)

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Rereading Multicultural Readers: What Definition of Multicultural Are We Buying ?

Paper presented at CCCC, Cinncinati, March 1992
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Last spring our writing program invited representatives from a dozen different textbook publishing companies to a bookfair in our department. The book representatives displayed texts for freshman composition, advanced writing and argument, and some survey lit courses. The room was crowded and busy most of the day. As I wandered among the displays, I overheard a faculty member talking to her graduate teaching assistant : "Look! *Crossing Cultures*, (Macmillan) get a copy of that. Oh, *American Mosaic, A Multicultural Reader*, (Houghton Mifflin) let's get that one too. *Across Culture* (Allyn and Bacon) looks good." They rushed from display to display pouncing on all the readers that had the world culture, or multicultural in the title.

What exactly was their motivation, I wondered? What were they looking for, and were they finding it?

I came to this topic with a preconception. I 'll admit that I had serious doubts about the flood of new multicultural readers that were hitting the market. I was concerned that publishers were rushing in where serious academic scholars feared to tread! I began looking at these readers to find flaws--which I did, but I also came to respect both the goals and the execution of a number of these books.

Since the first cross cultural or multicultural reader was piloted in the early 1980's with the first edition of *Crossing Cultures*, (1983) the multicultural reader has become the hottest idea to hit textbook companies since the revolution in rhetorics from modes to process.

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Every company, it seems, wants to jump on the multicultural bandwagon, yet except for the market surveys done by the companies themselves, there has been no systematic examination of how these readers are being used, the purposes and audiences for which they are written, or the critical reception they've received.

I'd like to provide that context for these readers, and suggest that, as teachers, we have a responsibility to look closely at our cultural and epistemological assumptions as we choose readers for our freshman composition classes.

This paper addresses three issues in particular:

First: How should we describe these readers, and how do they differ from other anthologies for writing courses?

Second: How do these textbooks influence our pedagogy?

Third: Can we be sure that efforts to recognize and teach diversity will ultimately result in empowering our students?

First: The textbooks themselves

Traditional composition textbooks fall into two broad categories: texts about writing strategies called rhetorics, and anthologies called readers. These distinctions are not hard and fast, however. Many rhetorics include short essays or stories for analysis and discussion, and many readers include rhetorical approaches the the text. Multicultural readers distinguish themselves from traditional anthologies along several axes.

First, they reach wide to encompass the broadest possible representation of different ethnic and cultural sources. Many highlight their geographical coverage by including maps with dots indicating the countries represented or a geographical index at the back of the book where you can look up a country and find related readings. These maps are quite useful, especially when we think about our current generation

of students, many of whom could probably not place Indonesia on a map. A number of subtleties suggest that the authors and the editors have a strong commitment to both decentering the students' perspectives and contextualizing the readings--at least one of the maps (*Ourselves Among Others*, Bedford/St. Martins) displays a map that doesn't put the Americas at the center--instead, Eurasia is centered on the page. Looking at the chart below, illustrates how Carol Verburg's *Ourselves Among Others* has almost twice as many cultures represented as it's nearest competitor, Marilyn Smith Layton's *Intercultural Journeys*, Gillespie and Singleton's *Across Cultures* also has an exceptionally broad representation of ethnicities,

yet there is an interesting, if subtle distinction among the readings in these books.

I looked carefully at selections and their authors and found that some of these texts relied more heavily on what I'll call "a western Anthropologist viewpoint."

Across Cultures (Allyn and Bacon) 18 % of the 36 readings are written by western "observers" of culture,

In while 23% of the 15 readings in Macmillan's Crossing *Cultures* took a similar perspective.

in *Ourselves Among Others*, only 4% of the 45 different ethnicities represented were written from anthropologist's view

When I asked the two publishers about this relatively high percentage of western perspective commentary, in Across Culturea and Crossing Cultures both Allyn and Bacon Macmillan said that this was an intentional emphasis. Anthropologists, such as John King Fairbank,"Footbinding" (*Across Cultures* 36), and Clyde Kluckhohn" "Customs," (*Crossing Cultures* 271) bring insights to the cultures that they study that students would otherwise miss. The best anthropologists

are consummate observers and story-tellers. And even more to the point, these authors wrote in English, and which mooted the translation problem.

The flip side of these statistics is that more than 80% of all the readings in these books (and in some cases more than 95%) are written by "insiders", participants in a culture, rather than observers. These voices speak directly to the students, and, under the best circumstances, succeed in broadening students' perspectives.

But geographic distribution is only one criterion that these anthologies use to define themselves as multicultural. In addition to geographic distribution, many of these textbooks advertise that a significant percentage --30, 40, even 50%-- of the readings are written by women. In fact, gender has become such an important consideration that one of the publishing companies new to composition, Allyn and Bacon, has come out this year with the "*Gender Reader,*" devoted exclusively to issues of gender and feminism. Although I haven't included that text in this analysis, considerable discussion could be devoted to the idea of a gender reader as a cross cultural text.

A second characteristic that distinguishes multicultural readers from more traditional readers is their thematic organization. Thematic organization is not new in composition textbooks--some of the bestselling anthologies are organized thematically. But the problem raised by these newer cross-cultural readers is whether their selections are rhetorically interesting as well as thematically topical. Traditional anthologies that are thematically organized have been careful to include a variety of rhetorical modes such as narration, description, comparison and contrast, definition, persuasion and argument (*The Longwood Reader*, Allyn and Bacon, *Subject and Strategy*, St. Martins, *The Winchester Reader*, Bedford/St. Martins). In fact, the traditional anthologies foreground differences of rhetorical mode, trying to put different types of writing into each thematically organized chapter.

Cross cultural readers change the focus of the organization strategically. If the governing principle is not to look at varieties of types

of writing, but rather to hear different voices--both culturally different, and politically different-- then we may lose some of the rhetorical diversity that is critical to a freshman writing class. The idea of focusing on multiple perspectives on decidedly controversial issues is certainly a worthy goal in a college class, but when thematic organization drives an anthology, users need to raise questions about the principles of selection for the readings themselves: do the readings in each section represent models of good writing, or rhetorically interesting strategies, or have they been included primarily to broaden cultural perspectives?

Second: The influence of multicultural textbooks on teachers' pedagogy

Freshman writing teachers at large universities are often graduate students or instructors, the least experienced members of our faculty. Community colleges typically have a more mature, and experienced writing faculty, but in either case we rarely have the resources or the time to do an adequate job of staff development and training. For these teachers, textbooks and the accompanying instructor's manuals become their most important teaching tool. Several years ago, in a review essay in *College Composition and Communication*, Kathleen Welch observed that "probably textbooks are instructional material more important for the writing teacher than for the writing student." (271)

As a director of composition whose primary task is to prepare TA's to teach freshman composition classes, I am all too familiar with graduate students' dependence on textbooks. Because of the considerable influence these books exert through their instructors' manuals and their apparatus (the discussion questions and suggested writing assignments that precede or follow each reading) we should try to uncover their underlying theories of pedagogy. If we look carefully, we can detect some common characteristic features:

1. First, this learning theory celebrates self-reflection, asking students to dig into their own experience before reading, to bring personal insights to the readings. By connecting personal knowledge to academic discourse

this model claims to offer students opportunities to establish their own authority .

2. Second, the pedagogy is relativistic, asking students to make judgements, but always suggesting ways of fitting those judgements into a context. Some of the texts have pre-reading questions that prepare the student to read. Sharing responses to those pre-reading questions demonstrates to the students that they all begin with different sets of assumptions and will therefore approach the texts differently.

3. Third, the pedagogy fosters "active reading techniques" that teach students how to engage the text by questioning and commenting in the margins. The prevailing metaphor is "talking to the text" engaging in a dialectic, a "conversation," rather than a formal argument.

4. Fourth, the texts encourage and stress collaborative learning through exercises, projects and activities that attempt to establish communities within the classroom.

This combination of strategies draws heavily on current pedagogical theory. The goal is to empower the students, to counter the notion that students are academic outsiders and to reinforce to them that they do have valuable knowledge and experience to bring to the academy.

A second influence on classroom pedagogy centers on the principles of selection of the readings within the texts themselves as I mentioned earlier when discussing the thematic organization of the anthologies. Referring to the chart, we notice the heavy tilt in favor of narratives (stories) over argument or expository writing. Narrative is one rhetorical form that highlights the personal. It allows readers to share another perspective, to step into another's shoes. Even when we want to assume that everyone is like us, powerful personal narrative forces us to see things from a different perspective.

Personal narrative is easily accessible, and usually engaging. But straight narrative not the only rhetorical form a text can take. The advantage of narrative is that most students respond positively to the readings--its disadvantage is that undergraduate students in college courses will be encountering more challenging texts in other courses which will make higher level demands on their cognitive skills. In this respect, the inclusion of the "anthropologist perspective" that I mentioned earlier, adds an analytical dimension to the collections. It may be important to draw students' attention to the difference between first person narration and analytical exposition-two very different paths to understanding.

There is more at stake in a writing classroom than the content of the readings. Teaching writing, and learning to write continue to be heavily process oriented activities. The studies by Mike Rose and others tell us that one learns to write not by learning the rules, but by actually writing. The readings that provide the occasions for writing should be challenging at both the content level and the rhetorical level. The developmental models of learning suggest that students need to be pulled and pushed through a sequence of increasingly complex intellectual challenges.

The multicultural readers that I examined rely heavily on one type of discourse. It appears that they are primarily concerned with storytelling and personal reflection. When I talked to one experienced teacher who uses these texts, he commented, specifically, that more diversity across disciplines--including writings by internationally known scientists, sociologists, historians--would address his students' needs better. Another teacher described to me some of her problem students. When all else fails, she said, they fall back on recounting personal experiences-- equating writing with narrative.

This is not to say that personal narratives and stories are not challenging or valuable, only that at a certain point we need to see these texts in the context of the freshman's undergraduate experience. Most writing teachers would identify as a goal of the course, becoming

familiar with discourse across multiple disciplines. From that perspective, some of these textbooks may be missing the mark.

Third: From Diversity to Community

"Multiculturalism" has become a code word on college campuses today. Some, like Dinesch D'Souza, John Searle, and the editors of *New Republic* argue that "multiculturalism" is challenging the standard of academic and intellectual freedom associated with the tradition of western civilization. In debates on and off campuses, in and out of the press, and among those in the mainstream as well as those on the margins, multiculturalism is presented as either a new kind of intellectual totalitarianism, or a radical, necessary restructuring of an outmoded paradigm. We cannot escape that discussion; we are part of that continuing conversation, and we should not assume that any two of us can even agree on the terms of that debate.

Publishers are capitalizing on the trend toward "cultural studies" by foregrounding "culture" in the titles of these books--that is why those graduate students I spoke of earlier and their professors rushed to get sample copies. The books are making a statement, taking a stand in their titles, proclaiming that they are on the cutting edge of the wave that sweeping though college campuses. These books claim at least three potentially conflicting audiences and purposes:

> First, they claim the audience of culturally mainstream students who, presumably, need their horizons expanded, who need to be exposed to the diversity of cultures and values in order to be able to function in and help shape our post-modern world. For those students selections by Richard Rodriguez, Maxine Hong Kingston, Michael Novak, Brent Staples, Maya Angelou, Tony Morrison, Alice Walker, N. Scott Momaday, Gloria Naylor, and Mitsue Yamada provide new points of view to be studied, tried on, engaged with.
>
> The second audience is the marginalized-- people of color, women, sexual minorities-- who need to find some lifeline of

connection to the academy, who need to be able to value their own personal and cultural identities, and who challenge the institution to expand its vision.

Third is the audience of teachers who depend on these textbooks to help them shape a writing course with realistic goals and standards that will serve the best interests of both the students and the academy.

As I acknowledged at the beginning of this discussion, I came to this investigation with some particular preconceptions about what I would find. The books fulfilled some of those expectations, and surprised me with respect to others. I think the books certainly can claim a kind of diversity, but I do not think that cultural diversity is the only, or even primary goal of a writing class. The primary goal of writing classes is to teach students to write--for many different purposes, in many different contexts, across different disciplines. Before we adopt any textbook, but especially one of the newer multicultural texts, we need to determine that it will address our primary purposes in the course. To restate the obvious, we should try to remember that there are different kinds of difference.

Survey of Multicultural Readers for Freshman Composition

Title and Publisher	Number of pages in book	Average Length of Readings (pages)	Lengths of Longest/ Shortest Readings (pages)	Number and Percentage of Women Authors	Number of different Ethnic groups represented	Percentage of western authors writing about non-western cultures	Percentage of essay/ argument ("academic discourse") compared to narrative.
Across Cultures (Allyn & Bacon)	490	6	13/1	27 37%	36	18%	7%
Crossing Cultures (Macmillan)	494	7	18/2	21 32%	16	23%	24%
Emerging Voices (Holt Rinehart)	428	5.5	25/1	24 34%	14	7%	7%
Intercultural Journeys (HarperCollins)	638	9.5	19/4	18 29%	26	16%	9%
Ourselves Among Others (Bedford/St. Martins)	703	9	25/4	23 34%	45	4%	23.5%
Rereading America (Bedford/St. Martins)	668	8	17/1	30 39%	12	5%	5%
Winchester Reader (Bedford/St. Martins)	1006	7	13/1	50 42%	23	1.5%	49%
Writing About the World (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich)	624	5.5	14/1	30 26%	16	16%	58%

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